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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH<sup>1</sup>

BY F. M. COLBY

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THERE is good measure of exciting elements in this long, unsmiling novel, and you feel on each page that the author has arranged everything for the good of your soul. Never a moment's relaxation of his orthodox religious and moral purposes. Never a moment's doubt on the reader's part that sins are impending and that retribution is not far behind. You learn in the first chapter that the hero is going to be tempted, and you can guess from the ominous language that he is going to fall. The hero is Louis Savignan, author of *The History of the Clergy of France in the Eighteenth Century*, and of *The Church and Education*, a brilliant and learned defender of the Church, who down to the age of forty-three, when the story begins, has been a tower of strength both morally and mentally. But at the first mention of his name we are warned that forty-three is the midday of life and confronted with the Latin version of the sixth verse of the nineteenth psalm — *a sagitta volante in die, a negotio perambulante in tenebris, ab incursu et dæmonio meridiano* — in which the *dæmonium meridianum* is not the "sickness that destroyeth in the noonday," but the dangerous middle stage of life. Dom Bayle, a Benedictine monk, thus explains it to us: It is the temptation that assails a man in middle life—

Hitherto he has followed his destiny from virtues to virtues, from success to success. Then it is that the spirit of destruction seizes upon him—of self-destruction, mind you. A hostile power draws him from his course into the way where he must perish. This strange vertigo runs from spiritual into temporal affairs. There was, to observe it in history, Bonaparte in 1809, undertaking the war in Spain; his nephew, fifty years later, that of Italy. To mark it elsewhere, the Victor Hugo of *Feuilles d'automne* and the Lamartine of *Harmonies*, tempted by politics. . . .

Never was novelist more explicit in his forewarnings. A few pages further, and we are told precisely what form the demon

<sup>1</sup> *Le Démon de Midi*. By Paul Bourget. Paris, 1914. 2 vols.

of Louis Savignan is going to take. Dom Bayle, an indefatigable worker in the Clerical interest, has been discussing with the Abbé Lartigue Savignan's candidacy for the Chamber of Deputies from Clermont. They agree that no better deputy could be found, and believe he will have the support of the wealthy sugar-refiner Calvières, who is all-powerful in the district, and who has quarreled with the present representatives. They look forward with confidence to the approaching interview between Calvières and Savignan, for, as one of them remarks, in politics one can always be sure of the enemy of one's adversary, and Calvières will love Savignan by all the hate he bears his opponent (Laverdy), with whom his quarrel is personal as well as political; for Madame Calvières, being of the old and noble family of Soléac, had refused to receive the wife of Laverdy, who revenged himself by preventing Calvières from obtaining a certain decoration which he coveted. But, says the author, the complexities of life escape, and disconcert all analysis. There were these two priests congratulating themselves on this interview between Calvières and Savignan, as sure to lead to triumph. What if they had known that the young girl who had betrayed Savignan twenty years before, who had nearly broken his heart, was this same Geneviève de Soléac, now the wife of Fernand Calvières!

Thus the efforts of the two priests to assure to the Third district of Clermont a Catholic deputy were to have this unlooked-for result: The celebrated religious historian brought face to face with her whom he has so passionately loved when she was free—now that she was free no longer. Was not this an occasion for that dissolution in middle life which the old monk had mystically called the demon of noonday—a *meridiano daemonio*?

Then that the last doubt of impending moral catastrophe may be removed—

Louis knew that Calvières was coming to see him at his hotel at five o'clock, and this encounter with the husband of the woman he had so passionately regretted did not so much as stir in him a feeling of curiosity. Who has compared the heart of man to one of those palimpsests whereon the first characters have been effaced and then covered with another text? But the signs effaced are always there. In a real parchment they are brought out by a chemical reaction, in the human heart by a psychological reaction. This return to Clermont, after an absence of twenty years, was to be for Savignan the occasion of one of these renewals. His seasoned spirit of three-and-forty years was, by a retrospective mirage, to give place, for some moments, to the

mad and violent spirit of his twenty-first year, and the demon of noon-day was to take this way of directing his destiny along the most perilous of courses.

This strange proleptic weakness, betrayed at frequent intervals, makes one nervous, not so much on the hero's account as for fear lest the author may at any minute let the cat out of the bag and thenceforth tell his story backward. Indeed, at times, he almost does. The moral doom of Savignan is so completely sealed from the beginning that what follows seems hardly more than a sort of ethical autopsy. It is impossible to feel any personal interest in Savignan. He has no more personal identity than any other of the human symbols in the fiction of religious controversy. Like Robert Elsmere, or a firecracker, he was put together simply that he might for purposes of demonstration be exploded. The sole interest is in the disease of which the soul of Savignan shall surely perish. "We must live as we think; otherwise we shall end by thinking as we have lived"—that, says one of the characters in conclusion, is the great lesson of this story. "Can high religious certitudes exist side by side in a public man with the worst disorders of passion?" asks M. Bourget in his preface, and these two volumes of moral geometry prove that they cannot. Savignan is put together so systematically and comes apart so neatly that it seems as if it might be expressed in almost technical terms. Given an equilateral paragon, let a line of passion be drawn through the center of him, and it will divide him into superior and inferior moral natures with homologous sides.

Savignan to the age of forty-three had led a blameless life and by his talents and hard work had earned distinction and success. Strictly orthodox, but not fervent in his faith, a man of thought rather than of feeling, he had devoted himself to the defense of the Church both as a historian and as a controversialist, and was recognized as its foremost intellectual champion. He was Catholic not merely from faith, but by reasoned conviction, by his sense of the necessity of order and discipline. "I might become an atheist," he said, "but as a Frenchman I should continue to declare myself a Catholic." What he esteemed most in the Church was the hierarchy, the submission of the individual will. Of all modernizing tendencies he had an inveterate hatred and fear, and his chief anxiety was for the spiritual welfare of his only son, a young man of twenty with scholarly tastes like his own, who had fallen under the influence of an eloquent Modernist teacher named Fauchon. In his

debates with his son on the pernicious doctrines of Fauchon, a good deal of recent religious controversies is condensed or diluted or sentimentalized. These, then, are Savignan's main ingredients; in fact, with the smoldering passion above mentioned, they are the only elements we are able to discern. Probably our sense of extreme simplicity is not the author's desired effect, but he must be pushing on to his demonstration. In passing I will simply say that it is incredible that Savignan should ever have smiled, laughed, behaved irrelevantly, said a foolish thing, or partaken of earthly food in his life. Now into this thinly populated soul there enters passion. In a larger or more complicated spiritual organism like that, let us say, of the average policeman, the disaster would not have been so mathematically inevitable. But in the meager soul of the theological hero of current fiction a passion is like an alligator in a hall-room.

The passion for Geneviève burst out with the more force for the many years of repression. He had been chaste, ascetic; he seemed to have cheated himself out of life. Geneviève, too, had been cheated, for she had been forced by her family into a marriage with the coarse parvenu Calvières, and had loved Savignan all along. Geneviève's bitter experience had robbed her of her faith, and in her intercourse with Savignan she unconsciously tempted him to unbelief. But the logic of his criminal alliance with her drove him inevitably in that direction also.

How had his Catholicism served him? He did not take account of the fact that his adventure could be explained quite simply by the ancient adage, *Optimi pessima corruptio*, whether because the invisible spirit of evil employs more force against the most beautiful souls in time of trial, or because our repeated renouncements accumulate in us reserves of desire. . . . Savignan himself did not see this brutal fact: His doctrine had not held against his temptation.

Later he asked himself the further question. If a creed cannot sustain the individual, how can it sustain society?

He, the sagacious historian who for France had recognized through the centuries the striking concordance of certain beliefs with the national health, he of a sudden doubted that also. Troubled by his own case, he asked if this tie of cause and effect was not after all imaginary, if there had not been, instead of a concordance, a simple coincidence. Had not the vital energy of the nation functioned by itself, for ethnic and physiological reasons, coincidentally with ideas that were in themselves ineffective, so that the France of the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries was strong, for instance, simply

because it was France, and was Catholic in addition. Nothing could be more opposed than this fatalistic theory of race to the system which had hitherto served as the armor of his thought and work: A civilization thought out and willed by man. That such a hypothesis was beginning to haunt him was proof that the skepticism born of sin was mounting, mounting in his soul.

There is no need of following here the doomed soul to its undoing—or its possible awakening to a better life. An account of the finale of pistol-shots and renunciation, melodrama and theological vindication, would seem like the scenario of a moving-picture show; and such boiling down would do the book injustice. After all, it is a very good symbolical presentation of the duel between Modernism and Orthodoxy by one of the best of the uninspired novelists of the present day. If the characters do not live—and very few characters do live when you come to think of it—they at least expound and represent admirably. As a religious novelist M. Bourget is simply a religious journalist once removed. He is of the stuff that Hall-Caines and Humphry-Wards are made of—those excellent sponges of current thought. Ideas issue from his mind just as they enter it, untransformed. Characters do not exist, they merely enunciate, and if by chance they are blown up or strangled it is not in any sense a tragedy; it is merely a refutation. In the “novel of ideas” the ideas are almost always incorporated in persons about whom it is impossible to care a rap, and the present work is no exception to the rule. But at least we have the ideas and M. Bourget expresses them with greater eloquence than his English-speaking competitors in this field.

F. M. COLBY.